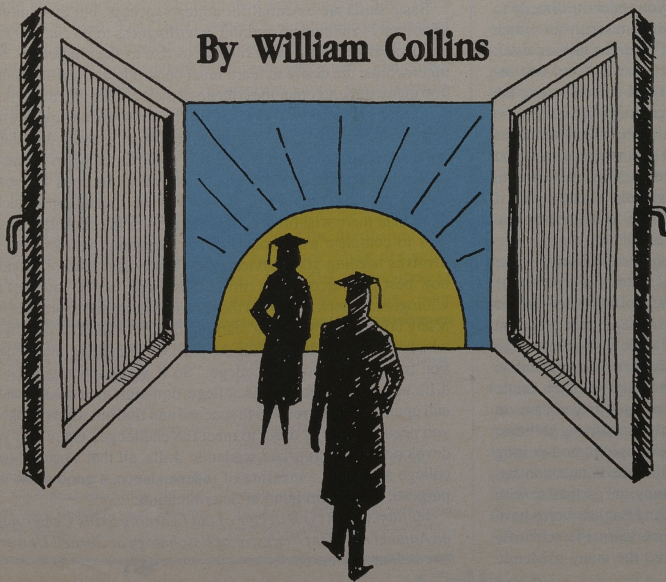


# Preparing to Succeed in College

By William Collins



Attending college opens horizons of the mind and can open the doors to one's future. The college experience also can be personally challenging, intellectually stimulating, and fun. By completing college we complete the first steps towards fulfilling life-long goals, whether those goals involve a specific career, such as medicine or law, or something more general such as becoming an educated person.

Black Americans have always placed an emphasis on the value of education and learning. Perhaps such emphasis was a direct result of being denied the opportunity to learn by the machinery of slavery and subsequent years of discrimination. Today, the opportunity to learn and to pursue higher education abounds and across the nation eager young faces continue to reflect the desire to pursue their goals through college. Yet, many black students really do not know what to expect in the typical college experience, particularly the experience of a predominantly white college setting. Moreover, most popular depictions of college, whether on television or in the movies, present something of a distorted image. The typical college experience is neither as wild and irreverent as the movie *Animal House* portrayed, nor as caring and supportive as the popular television

show *A Different World* would suggest. In reality, the typical college experience is actually a mixed bag of challenges which requires the successful student to have a variety of skills at his or her disposal, including a measure of independence, a firm sense of purpose, a repertoire of academic skills, and a solid lump of determination. Obviously these skills are not developed overnight, but they certainly can be cultivated by the serious minority student while still in high school and doing so can make you much better prepared to succeed in college.

Dealing with independence is one of the most difficult tasks for any freshman, particularly at a residential campus, and it can be doubly difficult if you have the wrong idea about what to expect in college. For example, if you expect your freshman year to be one long series of parties and pranks, interspersed with an occasional lecture or assignment, then it is not likely that you will apply yourself properly to college



course requirements. Being away from home and making your own decisions about what to eat, when to study, how much to socialize, or when to go to bed, all involve independent decision-making. The successful college student is able to weigh the costs associated with any particular decision as it relates to his or her goals and purposes for attending college. The right decision is the one that serves to further the attainment of one's goals.

Many colleges and universities offer summer programs for college-bound students. Participation in such programs is a good way to get a sense of what college is really like and to give some focus to your purpose for attending college. Some programs concentrate on students who are interested in specific careers such as engineering or medicine. Other programs provide a broad-based exposure to the liberal arts college curriculum. Summer programs are generally available to students who have completed either the tenth or the eleventh grade in high school and most programs provide full scholarships to cover the cost of participation. Such programs provide an excellent opportunity to learn about college; you gain first hand experience about dormitory living, about college coursework, and about the expectations of college professors. I highly recommend that you participate in such programs if you can. A good time to start looking for such programs is the beginning of the tenth grade. Ask your guidance counselor for information or write directly to the college you're interested in attending to inquire about special summer programs for high school students. Most colleges have a Summer Session office that can answer your questions or you can write directly to the admissions office. In either case be sure to start your search for special summer programs early; that is, in the fall semester. Many summer programs have an application process that requires all of your forms to be submitted by February. Also the scholarship award decisions for summer programs tend to be made early, for example in March or April. What all of this means is that you should start early to identify summer programs that interest you and to apply for acceptance to them. It's okay to apply to more than one program for the same summer, but if accepted to more than one program, be sure to write back and decline the offer if you will not be able to attend.

The academic skills needed for a successful college career have their foundation in the high school years. In general, the skills that will carry you through high school will need further development in order to serve you well in college. It is important to build these skills as much as possible while in high school so that they will be properly honed for further development in college. In general, you will want to study as much math, English, science, and foreign language courses as you can. In mathematics you will want to focus on problem-solving abilities; in English place special emphasis on developing good writing and critical analysis skills; also recognize the connection between English and foreign language study, in particular with respect to vocabulary building because many English words have their roots in foreign words. In science learn the scientific method and how it can be applied across the many academic

disciplines from astronomy to zoology. Learning is an active process, not a passive one, so actively engage yourself in every course you take in high school. Be alert and attentive in class, and ask questions frequently. Also, try to develop good listening skills. One of the most important skills to develop for college success is the ability to listen effectively because so much of what must be learned in college occurs in lectures or discussion groups. Effective listening involves much more than merely hearing the spoken word. The effective listener is able both to understand the central points made by the speaker, but also to recognize the nuance of the message.

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Basic skills are essential for college success, but even more important is an inquisitive mind, a willingness to be challenged intellectually, and an inner resolve to rise to the challenge. In other words, the desire to learn must be strong and unflinching. Too many students enter the college of their choice, but then give up on themselves too early because some other student appears to be better prepared or because the course-work is more demanding than was expected. It is precisely those times when we face difficult obstacles that the inner resolve to succeed is most important to us. Yet, the inner resolve to succeed requires much more than mere wishful thinking; it involves the conscientiousness to complete assignments while foregoing distractions; it involves heeding good advice from faculty and advisors about how best to overcome the difficulties faced; and it involves a willingness to seek help from those offices designed to provide it. Many colleges now have a learning center or tutorial program which can be very helpful for the purpose of making the transition from high school to college. So if you happen to face a difficult academic obstacle in college, don't just give up. Instead, call upon your inner resolve to succeed and find out what changes you need to make in order to meet the challenge. Once you've developed the appropriate academic skills, all that's needed for college success is a measure of independence, a good sense of purpose, and a solid lump of determination.

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